DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 535 PS 016 981

AUTHOR Glossop, Robert
TITLE Beyond the Future as Cliche: Making a Place for Families in the Future.
INSTITUTION Vanier Inst. of the Family, Ottawa (Ontario).
PUB DATE Jun 85
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Western Canadian Conference on Family Practice and the Canadian Association for Treatment and Study of the Family (9th, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, June 5-9, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Economic Factors; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Problems; Foreign Countries; *Futures (of Society); *Public Policy; *Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Family Policy; *Quebec; Social Good

ABSTRACT

The idea of family is being rediscovered in the 1980s. By no means coincidentally, industrial economies throughout the western world have been experiencing serious contraction. Quebec's 1984 working paper on family policy, "For Quebec Families," is illustrative of one government's rediscovery of family by means of the appropriation of the idea of family as a principle of integration within the context of characteristically atomistic and fragmented industrial states. However, it is by no means clear that one can any longer reasonably speak of the family and its potentials, capacities, and strengths. Current family realities force one to speak of diverse types of family and of the complexly interwoven dimensions of family living. If researchers are to make a place for families in the future, they will devote themselves to a fundamental, and likely critical, assessment of patterns of economic development, income distribution, work, employment, and education. Reappraisal of Quebec's working paper on family policy suggests that it provides a family perspective on a wide range of public policies, identifying the interdependence among families within their neighborhoods and communities as crucial to the creation of a central place for families in the future of Quebec society. (RH)

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120 Holland, Ottawa, Canada K1Y 0X6 (613) 722-4007

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BEYOND THE FUTURE AS CLICHE

MAKING A PLACE FOR FAMILIES IN THE FUTURE

Robert Glossop, Ph.D.
Vanier Institute of the Family

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Presented during the keynote panel on 'The Future of the Family: 2001' to the 9th Western Canadian Conference on Family Practice and the Canadian Association for Treatment and Study of the Family, Vancouver, June 5-9, 1985.

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BEYOND THE FUTURE AS CLICHE

MAKING A PLACE FOR FAMILIES IN THE FUTURE

The idea of family is being rediscovered in the 1980's. In fact, we have been told that the gauntlet has been thrown down and that a "war over the family" (Berger & Berger, 1983) is now being waged with economists, academics, feminists, bureaucrats, political 'rightists' and 'leftists' encamped on the battlefield. In 1983, Letty Cottin Pogrebin went so far as to suggest that:

> ...it seems safe to say that what civil rights and Vietnam were to the Sixties, and women's rights and the environment were to the Seventies, family issues have become to the Eighties. (1983, p. 2).

Until quite recently, we had allowed ourselves to believe that the 'modern' family had evolved into a specialized unit of emotional and psychological commitment, a societal institution no longer devoted to its earlier functions of economic production, education, health care and welfare. Today, however, the functional significance of family has been rediscovered and families are heralded as potential agents of health promotion, providers of care for the aged, sick and disabled, as the principal loci of attitudinal and behavioral change and as the first source of economic and financial security for their members.

I suggest that it is by no means coincidental that the functional significance of family is being rediscovered at a time when industrial economies throughout the western world have been experiencing serious contraction. We are beginning to understand that 'restraint' is becoming a way of life instead of a temporary aberration within a constant

process of growth. Ironically, when the support, protection and security once promised by the so-called Welfare State is needed more than ever before, the viability of modern systems of income and social security, education, health care and the other complex institutions upon which we have grown to depend so heavily has been challenged fundamentally by persistently high levels of unemployment, the aging of the population, declining birth rates and other factors. It is in these circumstances that we are invited - be it by the moral majority, fiscal conservatives or those who use the term family as a rhetorical justification for a wide array of social policies - to turn our attention, once again, to the intimate relationships people establish within their families and to see these relationships as not only emotionally and psychologically and individually significant but as socially, economically and culturally significant.

Regardless of the divergent ideological purposes served by such invitations, the citizens of modern societies are being asked to reaffirm the significance of relationships of kin and kith as central to the life of a society. We have been reminded that in traditional cultures, it was, by custom, elementary structures of kinship that provided for their members a sense of coherence and meaning to the daily activities and the rituals that affirmed their membership in a life shared with others. If, today, we find it necessary to invoke again the notion of family as a central principle of social order or social cohesion, it is necessary to ask what was it that served, in its absence, to provide people with a sense of integration and coherence.

To find the answer, we can turn to a most interesting and valuable initiative undertaken by the Government of Québec which is illustrative of one government's rediscovery of family. With the publication of its Working Paper on Family Policy entitled For Québec Families (Govt. of Qué.; 1984), the government of Quebec has launched a process of public consultation about the future place and significance of families in Québec society. This so-called Green Paper is a document that appropriates the idea of family as a principle of integration within the context of characteristically atomistic and fragmented industrial states. The answer to our question about what provided a sense of coherence and human meaning to people's lives in the absence of once central filial and affilial bonds is evident when the Québec Green Paper states that:

> In the final analysis, we must strive toward a major objective: that of according as much importance to the role of persons as parents as we do to them as workers. (p. 64)

This statement sheds light on the extent to which industrially-based societies have been organized around the central place they accord to employment. In an industrial context, the once central and integrating role of kinship relations is remembered only dimly through the metaphors of kinship as they are taken over by commercial and employment-related interests which speak on behalf of their 'family of companies' each of which employs the 'brothers' and 'sisters' of the labour movement. It is one's membership in the labour force rather than one's membership in elementary structures of kinship that has become not only the principal means of access to income and societal benefits but also the essential foundation of one's social status and personal identity.

But, as we approach the future (the now proverbial 2001), it appears that employment (at least as we have known it) may no longer fulfill its role as the central principle of social cohesion. We already confront the prospect of persistently high levels of unemployment. We have met the social, ecological and psychological limits to indiscriminate growth in consumption and production and we face instead the prospects of 'slow-growth' or 'no-growth' economies. We anticipate, with both fear and hope, the power and productive capacities of new technologies. In all advanced economies, the so-called Welfare State that has evolved as compensation for the erosion of informal family- and community-based sources of material and social support is now threatened by severe restraint. The isolation of the nuclear family which has exacerbated our dependence upon the services provided by the Welfare State has reached critical proportions and this 'overloaded fuse' is now known to be the context of much violence, sex-role conflicts, alcoholism, suicidal adolescents and more. The rediscovery of the functional significance of family is taking place in a context of social, economic, technological, political and cultural changes that have been assessed by many to be as profound as those changes that ushered in the era of industrialization.

Today we have become familiar with various post-industrial, hi-tech, information-age scenarios in which we will, according to the futurologists, become accustomed to part-time work, job sharing and perpetual occupational training, retraining and career upgrading which are interspersed by forays into the world of employment. We are told that we can look forward to the integration of our working lives and our family

lives with images of electronic cottage industries and variations on the theme of work at home. Such integration, we are told, promises us a future in which we will no longer define ourselves as employees but rather as creative, self-directed and imaginative persons, as full human beings whose many facets and dimensions will be respected and encouraged to grow. What these utopian post-industrial scenarios imply is a process of perpetual self-redefinition in terms that are less tied than today to our status in the industrial work force. As such, the rediscovery of the functional significance of families goes beyond a mere economic instrumentality and is projected as a source of continuity and meaning in the face of the threat to stable personal identities that may be occasioned by the transience and uncertainty of relationships in a drastically altered labour force.

Regardless of the value of the aspirations embedded in such scenarios of a future in which family has been rediscovered, they all too often convey a romanticized and unrealistic image of a way of family life gone by. What is this thing called the family that promises to deliver us from the contradictions and dilemmas of the modern state? It is by no means clear that one can any longer reasonably speak of <u>the</u> family and its potentials, its capacities, its strengths. Is it the 'strength' of the isolated and so often economically disadvantaged lone-parent family that we will come to rely upon more? Is it the capacities of those 25 per cent of families that live below the poverty line that will sustain us (C.C.S.D., 1984, p. 58)? Is it the dual wage-earning family that will add to its already frenetic schedule of industrial work routines, household management and child-care administration the

responsibilities associated with the care of the old or the sick? Is it today's childless couples that will be supported in their old age by family?

It has been said (Zijderveld, 1979) that we live in a "clichégenic society" (p. 25); that is, a society in which phrases that express "a popular or common thought or idea that has lost originality, ingenuity and impact by long overuse" (Random House) function as platitudes or bromides. Through their repetition, clichés are like sacred intonations that prepare us to speak, to think and to act in certain ways but without reflection on their meaning. Clichés are "containers of old experience" (Zijderveld, p. 11) and they proliferate during the process of modernization precisely because they provide an illusion of stability in the midst of shifting values and meanings. Thus it is at this time of societal transition, at this time of the crisis of the Welfare State that we are invited to remember that the family is the 'cornerstone of society', the 'foundation' of social order and meaning, a 'private refuge' and a 'haven in a heartless world.'

In these circumstances, we are tempted to speak of <u>the</u> family when the contours of family realities really require us to speak of families and of the complexly interwoven dimensions of family living. If the rediscovery of family is to move beyond the level of rhetorical cliché, we will have to build upon rather than discard what Glen Elder Jr. (1981) called the 'discovery of complexity' in family studies.

We have begun to appreciate the multiple and complexly interwoven dimensions of family relationships that include: economic needs and obligations; emotional commitments and expectations; distributions of power; customary practices regarding residence; legal rights and responsibilities; rules pertaining to procreation, affective expression and sexuality; and, expectations with regard to cross-generational responsibilities for socialization, personality development and material and social support.

Although there are siginificant differences in the ways these multiple dimensions of family living are manifest in various family forms, they are nevertheless common dimensions of family relationships. Moreover, we are beginning to understand that these legal, procreative, socialization, sexual, residential and economic functions which are commonly attributed to family as defining characteristics need not necessarily be fulfilled congruently, concomitantly or indeed solely within the boundaries of family interaction (Eichler, 1981). For example, the dissolution of marriage through separation and divorce does not, in reality, dissolve all the dimensions of family that bind persons to one another. The rights, obligations, commitments and attachments may be profoundly redefined in such circumstances yet they survive throughout, both for better and for worse. Legal separation and divorce do not sever all legal, economic and emotional obligations; this becomes patently evident when we recognize how extensive and extreme are the problems occasioned by the number of maintenance orders that are in default.

Again, we can see that certain dimensions of family endure despite the legal dissolution of marriage when conditions of custody and access are set in principle and negotiated in daily practice. As well, it is evident in the tasks confronted by blended families that they cannot simply dismantle the integrity of past experience but instead must seek to integrate sets of already interwoven biographies.

The discovery of complexity in family relations has made us more sensitive to the entire range of institutional and societal factors that influence the capacities of families to manage the complex facets of their lives. It has reminded us that families are economic, political, legal and educational constructs as well as psychological and affective units. With the emerging emphasis on so-called ecological or contextual frames of reference in the social sciences, it has become evident that it is no longer sufficient to pursue studies that try to control for the influence of factors once defined conceptually as extraneous to our subject of inquiry, families.

On the contrary, we now understand that if we are to make a place for families in the future, we will devote ourselves to a fundamental and likely critical assessment of patterns of economic development (which require 50% of Canadians to move every five years thereby undermining neighbourhoods and communities (Statistics Canada, 1983), of patterns of income distribution (that severely marginalize anyone who is not active in the labour force), of patterns of work and employment (that discriminate between winners and losers on the basis of age and sex, and command our allegiance to routinized and inflexible time schedules,

work routines and linear educational, job and career paths) and of education (that reinforces the segregation of people by age).

If I may borrow once again from Québec's Green Paper on family policy, we see that its proposals in fact provide us not so much with a family policy per se but rather with a family perspective on a wide range of public policies. It takes as fundamental questions of income distribution and taxation from the point of view of diverse family types, it examines possibilities for better integrating the responsibilities that adults assume as workers and parents. The objectives pursued within this governmental initiative are ambitious dealing with a wide range of topics including housing, education, recreation and culture, family violence and the delivery of services. It is a document that extends the range of a family policy perspective beyond an emphasis on particular families by introducing proposals designed principally to revitalize neighbourhoods and communities. It speaks of the design of living habitats and not just houses; it seeks to create environments in which persons of different generations will get together in common activities; it obliges schools to become genuine centres of culture and education accessible to the population in general; it commits itself to the promotion of services to families that are oriented toward the support of mutual help and toward the development of educational and preventive programs that go beyond curative and crisis-oriented intensive services. In these ways, it is the interdependence among families within their neighbourhoods and communities that the Green Paper has identified as crucial to the creation of a central place for families in the future of Québec society.

There are no guarantees that the vision articulated in Québec's Green Paper can be realized. It calls for a tremendous redefinition of priorities at a time when governments are most inclined to reject out of hand anything that might require increased expenditures. Yet, it has argued effectively that the expenditures that seem so burdensome today are, in good measure, the costs of doing business in a world in which family has been taken-for-granted or treated as an externality. It allows us to see again that governmental programs and initiatives designed to enhance the capacities of families and communities cannot be regarded as a simple social expenditure but rather needs to be regarded as a fundamental form of economic investment.

The Quebec Green Paper is an example of one initiative that has escaped the hold of familistic clichés. It goes some considerable distance beyond the conventional sanctimonious rhetoric about the family with which we customarily manage to ignore all the basic conditions families need to exist. To borrow from the sub-title of Dr. Schwartz's book (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), families need money, work and sex. And, to enjoy any one of these, they need time so that they might share their liveliness rather than just their tiredness as is so often the case now. Family life should claim a priority on time and energy and should not be resigned to living on the leftovers. We must strive to build an economy that is there to support families on the basis of one that now requires in too many ways that families absorb the costs of doing business as usual. We will have to recover an appreciation of the fact that most people still achieve because of family and not in spite of it - even within the midst of our politics and economics of individualism.

There has been speculation that there is no future for families. Some have gone so far as to suggest that there should be no future for families given that the dominant impression one gets from our daily doses of research findings and popular press reports would lead one to believe that families are nothing more than the places where wives are beaten, children assaulted, sexually abused and abducted, places rife with spousal acrimony which ends in separation and divorce followed by the flagrant refusal to abide by maintenance and support orders. Yet, someone has suggested that the 80's will be the decade when family strikes back. I'm not sure against what but curiously last week the current issue of Psychology Today (June, 1985) appears on my desk with its cover story on "Why Marriages Last" while I am reading the cover story in Ms. magazine (June, 1985) entitled "Staying in Love; Secrets of Marriages that Last." Family strengths, well-functioning families, positive family functioning and parenting are research themes taken up in the recent past. Recent surveys of the attitudes of youth (Bibby & Posterski, 1985) testify, as do high rates of remarriage, to the fact that there is still something about the idea of family that is constant and holds us to it even in the midst of the profound changes within families that we have witnessed in the past.

The question is not whether the family has a future. It does. 2001 is only 16 years from now, less than a generation. There may be too little time to expect radical and fundamental changes before then and we may anticipate that the diversity and pluralism we have known will continue. We will not likely return to a singular notion of the family but our commitments to family life, in various forms, will be

maintained. The real question is whether, as a society, we are willing to commit ourselves to creating the circumstances in which the commitments people make to one another can flourish. If we do not the idea of family will simply be used as a convenient apology for the withdrawal of informal and formal supports to families at a time when the increased pressures and expectations placed upon families would simply aggravate the already too common characteristic of families to deny the integrity of their individual members.

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